

# Brunswick Montessori Children's House

*Storied accounts of practice by the Tender Bridge*

## TENDER BRIDGE CASE OF SUCCESS: CASE 10

### From a chat at the sandpit to students in the classroom

*Rain cleared and the sun came out for the official opening of the Brunswick Montessori Children's House in mid-September 2014. Tender Bridge attended the opening of the early learning centre, located in the grounds of Brunswick North West Primary School in the northern suburbs of Melbourne. The early learning centre has been a Tender Bridge subscriber for several years. Anne Miles, one of three women driving the project since its inception, spoke to Tender Bridge about the journey.*



*Anne Miles (Vice President, committee of management) Jennifer Gottliebsen (President, committee of management) and Leanne McCoy (Principal)*

One day several years ago, three women (who happen to be mothers to ten children between them), were chatting about how they thought Montessori education could be expanded in Melbourne's inner north. Feeling there was a need for more pre-school choices for families with young children, they decided that they wanted to 'do something'.

Jennifer Gottliebsen has a background in marketing, Anne Miles is an occupational therapist, and Leanne McCoy is a Montessori educator. Says Anne, 'There are many talented women who happen to have children in tow who have a lot to offer. The most exciting deals these days are done in the sandpit, not on the golf course.'

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### Starting out

The initial focus was on finding a space, and the group began by ringing councils in the local area. One council employee they told about their project responded with 'What would you want to do that for?' Being told that to start a kindergarten was 'too hard' only served to steel their resolve.

Next, they tried local schools. Often schools were full and stretched for space for their own classes. In others, principals were just too busy to talk, or the idea was perceived as just too daunting.

The passion of the three women in getting their project off the ground drove them to constantly talk to people. Someone mentioned a spare tract of land adjacent to Brunswick North West Primary School. Principal Trevor Bowen took their call, and asked the women to come and meet him to hear what they had to say.

Trevor listened to their story, and Anne says that what was instrumental was his willingness to be open and to think creatively about what they wanted. 'Principals are busy people, and focused on the school's immediate needs. The last thing a principal wants is someone asking them, 'Can I start a kindergarten?' Timing is crucial.' The land in question was the former site of the Brunswick Special Development School, which had been gifted to the primary school when the Special School closed in 2010. To his credit, the school agreed to use of the land.

*'Developing a 12-slide 'pitch pack' .... really helped us to focus our story.'*



Brunswick Montessori Children's House site – before and after



With the most difficult part of the equation in place, their next need was money. One of the people in their networks was a property developer, and so they asked him for ideas on how to secure the funding required. The property developer advised them to develop a 'pitch pack'. They focused on a clearly defined vision of what they wanted to create before they approached anyone. They were encouraged to find an architect willing to develop an initial site plan pro bono to illustrate how the kindergarten could be positioned on the land. Mat Foley of Content Studio provided this which enabled a clear vision for the kindergarten 'So we developed a 12-slide 'pitch pack' that we took to the Strathmore Community Branch of the Bendigo Bank, and then to School Council. It really helped us to focus our story.'

#### The 'pitch pack'

The 'pitch pack' was a PowerPoint document that could either be emailed or presented in person. A master version was easily tailored to suit individual audiences.

The slides included information such as:

- *who they were*
- *the vision/mission/goals*
- *information about Montessori education*
- *photos of the site*
- *general architectural drawings/plans for the site*
- *funds required*
- *how the audience could help*

As support grew, they added logos of friends and partners of the project so people could see who else was involved, with the aim of encouraging others to jump on board.

The 'pitch pack' was used with DEECD, Moreland City Council, Brunswick North West Primary School, Strathmore Community Bank, Bank of Melbourne, Schools Connect, their local State MP and others.

As well as funds, the group also needed skills. 'Where we didn't have skills, we reached out to others in the community. We didn't feel we had to know everything about everything. We couldn't have done it without the support of those people,' says Anne.

*'Where we didn't have skills, we reached out to the community. We didn't have to know everything about everything.'*

#### Different levels of funding

The three women soon learnt that no funder was going to be prepared to fund the entire project, so they would have to break the project down into parts. They could make their proposals more attractive to funders as smaller bites rather than as a single large project. 'So then we could pitch different things to different funders', says Anne. The Strathmore Community Bank funded three things, but over time, not all at once. First there was the Casa Piccola (Little House) playgroup, then the kinder furniture, and then the child sized kitchen (part of their centre's Little Sprouts Kitchen Garden program). 'We did our banking with them, and experience taught us what kinds of amounts we could reasonably ask for.

We asked for different levels of funding.

For example, we asked for \$20,000 for one component, but told them that if they could only fund a smaller amount, we had a smaller need. So we gave them different funding levels to choose from.' That gave a choice to a funder who did want to fund them, but couldn't fund a larger amount. The funder could see that the smaller amount would still provide something meaningful. 'Small is better than nothing. You have to be flexible, and be aware, and you have to put yourself in the funder's position, because we go to them regularly. And if you are going to go back, you need to be a bit humble.'

*'We gave the funder different funding levels to choose from ... you have to be flexible, aware, and put yourself in the funder's position.'*

#### Local council - a great resource

The group has found local council to be a valuable resource. Anne says, 'Getting to know council was amazing. Moreland City Council have been





*Children play in the sandpit on the day of the launch*

incredibly supportive and welcoming.’ The City has provided invaluable support in the form of funding towards the playground area as well as a three-year operational grant. The local council provides a range of grants, all with a different focus.’

Anne acknowledges that capital funds, bricks and mortar funding can be hard to get, and so it was a big break when they were awarded a significant grant under the Victorian government’s Department of Education and Early Childhood Development’s ‘Children’s Facilities Capital program’, which supports early childhood programs and services. Finding the land and getting the capital grant were instrumental. ‘We met with DEECD prior to submitting our EOI for the Children’s Capital Grant. It was

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Anne has written numerous grant applications, and at one time was writing seven applications a month. She estimates her success rate as about one in every five. ‘One of our funders was the Collier Foundation. Montessori is very strong in language, maths and sensory education, very tailored, and a different approach, so to them we talked about the sensory and the language aspects to purchase related equipment.’

Wanting some legal guidance, Anne was on the phone again. Good fortune came from a cold call to a law firm who said they’d take on the centre as a pro bono client, and gave them a set number of hours. The

trio always try to rely on their own initiative, using friends as a last resort for the bigger things. The start was the hardest part, but many funders encouraged them to come back again when they had a building. And now with the DEECD grant, they had one.

### Some key learnings

Anne says she has learned that getting results is about thinking about the desired outcome from a range of different angles and thinking who might be able to help. ‘It’s about teaming with the right people, being creative, and still getting the same outcome but maybe going about it a different way. You have your goal in sight, but the path to the destination doesn’t always go the way you think it might.’

They learned to divide up their project and to package up their wants into finite items, such as the kitchen garden program, or literacy, so that the funder would have something they could put their stamp on, something to ‘own’. The non-monetary funding was also vital, and the group is very grateful to the in-kind support they received from a range of organizations and individuals which they estimate at being worth just short of \$300,000.

‘At first it was intimidating, sending out an application or talking to a funder, but the confidence has grown. One key thing I’ve learnt is about the pitch. You need a punchy line for your application. And always try to get to know the person before applying. First I send an email with a blurb about us and a link to our website.’ Anne then follows up with a phonecall.

*‘The path to the destination doesn’t always go the way you think it might.’*

The money is important, the physical resources are important, but the support is equally as important. One of their pitches was to their local MP, Jane Garrett. While Jane couldn't provide financial support, checking in with her on a regular basis gave them the pat on the back they needed to put the spring back in their step.

*'Always try to get to know the person before applying.'*

### School connections

The location of the early learning centre next to the primary school has engendered plans for cross-teamwork, so that the co-location is not limited to just a sharing of physical place. Cooperative plans for the future include having primary school students read to the kinder children and transition program options. The younger children hear the bell go at the school throughout the day, and they hear the principal speaking over the PA system – this familiarity with the sights and sounds of primary school will no doubt aid their transition into the school environment. Prep teachers will come down to the center to visit, sharing teaching approaches with early learning centre staff and the kindergarten children will visit the school library and the amazing menagerie of animals that live at BNWPS.

### An ongoing project

The entire project cost came in at \$802,000 plus GST. The initial goal was to build two classrooms but the estimated project cost was \$1.1 million and either reducing this cost or raising the total fund amount proved too challenging. A decision was made to start smaller, and then grow, a decision the group eventually decided to be a more responsible option.

### The DEECD grant timeline

The group first met with the Department in August 2012, submitted their Expression of Interest a few weeks later and then their full grant application in mid-September. They found out they had been successful in November, and then received the monies in May of 2013. They broke ground in September 2013 and opened in February 2014 to their first group of children.

### Grant-seeking and resourcing successes

- *Strathmore Community Bank branch of Bendigo Bank*  
\$10,000 to establish the Casa Piccola (Little House) Playgroup  
\$9,417 for furnishings (shelves, chairs, tables)  
\$ 5,000 for 'Little Sprouts' kitchen garden program
- *Moreland City Council*  
\$19,470 towards external learning space/playground  
\$30,000 three-year operational grant linked to the Casa Aperta (Open House) low-income program.  
Materials such as sand for the playground and mulch for the garden
- *Coles Junior Landcare*  
\$1,000 for kitchen garden
- *Collier Foundation*  
\$12,473 for language and sensory equipment
- *Communities for Natures*  
\$9,197.15 for revegetation of barren land with 1500 native and indigenous plants
- *Nelson Alexander Real Estate*  
\$750 for office equipment/supplies
- *Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, Victorian Government*  
\$600,000 under Children's Facilities Capital Program for buildings
- *Michael Achurch Trust*  
\$1,318 for outdoor playground equipment and materials
- *Rotary*  
Material contribution of office furniture and supplies
- *ResourceSmart Schools Awards 2014 (finalist)*  
\$500, which will be used to buy a worm farm
- *15 Trees*  
The cost of 135 trees and plants for the kindergarten grounds
- *\$3,782 of private donations towards equipment 'sponsorship'*

### Future plans

With an additional classroom and extra shade for the children some of the challenges that still await, the confidence, networking, passion and grant-writing skills of this motivated and passionate team of women will stand them in good stead as they continue to transform their ideas into reality.

### Links

*Brunswick Montessori Children's House:*  
<http://www.bmch.org.au/>

*Brunswick North West Primary School:*  
<http://www.brunswicknwps.vic.edu.au>

*Tender Bridge:*  
<http://tenderbridge.acer.edu.au>